

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 NEAE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00
NSAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 CCO-00 SSM-03
MCT-01 /065 W
-----122290 241743Z /43

O R 241212Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7359
INFO AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAUAO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
USLO RIYADH
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
USMISSION USUN NY
AMEMBASSY ALGIERS

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1667

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, PLO, LE, SY
SUBJECT: ASSAD UNDER FIRE

1. SUMMARY: ASSAD IS COMMITTED TO THE SUCCESS OF THE
UNIFIL OPERATION BUT FACES SIGNIFICANT PRESSURE FROM IRAQ,
EGYPT, AND THE LIBYANS TO GIVE MORE TANGIBLE SUPPORT TO
THE PALESTINIANS. BECAUSE HE DID NOT COME TO THE DIRECT
AID OF THE PLO IN SOUTH LEBANON, HE HAS LOST GROUND IN
THE ARAB COMPETITION PMR INFLUENCE IN THAT ORGANIZATION.
EXTERNAL PRESSURES ARE REPORTEDLY BEING REFLECTED IN ASSAD'S
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INTERNAL COUNCILS WHERE LACK OF PROGRESS TOWARD ASSAD'S
FOREIGN POLICY, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL GOALS IS DIMINISHING
HIS PERSUASIVENESS. WHILE WE BELIEVE ASSAD ENJOYS
STRONG SUPPORT WHERE IT COUNTS FOR KEEPING SYRIA UNINVOLVED
IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN FIGHTING, HE COULD USE TANGIBLE
EVIDENCE HIS POLICIES ARE SUCCEEDING. MOST HELPFUL WOULD
BE PROMPT AND CONTINUOUS MOVEMENT OF IDE OUT OF LEBANON.

END SUMMARY.

2. ASSAD IS CLEARLY AWARE OF THE DANGERS INHERENT IN THE PRESENT SITUATION IN LEBANON AND THROUGH KHADDAM HAS PLEDGED TO US THAT HE WILL DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO ENSURE THAT UNIFIL OPERATION IN SOUTH LEBANON IS SUCCESSFUL. BUT THERE ARE LIMITS AT THIS POINT IN TIME TO HOW FIRMLY ASSAD CAN MOVE TO CONTROL THE PALESTINIANS NORTH OF THE LITANI OR INTERDICT IRAQI SUPPLIES. HE IS UNDER MASSIVE PROPAGANDA PRESSURE FROM THE IRAQIS AND THE EGYPTIANS AND FINANCIAL PRESSURE FROM THE LIBYANS TO GIVE MORE TANGIBLE SUPPORT TO THE PALESTINIANS. IN ADDITION, HE HAS FURTHER LOST STATUS AMONG AND INFLUENCE ON THE PALESTINIANS BECAUSE OF HIS RESPONSIBLE POSTURE IN LEBANON. AN INDICATION OF PLO ANGER WAS REFLECTED THREE DAYS AGO AT YARMUK CAMP ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF DAMASCUS WHEN PALESTINIAN REFUGEE DEMONSTRATORS ANGRILY CHALLENGED ASSAD'S POLICY. IN ADDITION, ACCORDING TO ROMANIAN EMBOFF, NEW PALESTINIAN TERRORIST GROUP IS UNDER FORMATION "IN THE GULF" FOR SOLE PURPOSE OF ATTACKING SYRIAN REGIME.

3. EXTERNAL PRESSURES ON ASSAD INVARIABLY FIND THEIR ECHOES IN HIS INTERNAL COUNCILS. TISHRIIN DEPUTY EDITOR RIFAI TOLD US MARCH 23 THAT ASSAD IS CURRENTLY FACING STRONG CRITICISM WITHIN THE COMMANDS OF THE BAATH PARTY FOR HIS POLICY TOWARD THE PALESTINIANS AND HIS RELIANCE ON THE CONFIDENTIAL

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UNITED STATES TO ENSURE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT BAATHIS OR ANYBODY ELSE IN SYRIA IS CURRENTLY CALLING ON PRESIDENT ASSAD TO GO TO WAR WITH ISRAEL, BUT THEY ARE FRUSTRATED, THEY WANT TO SEE ACTION, AND THEY DON'T LIKE BEING PLW TJ IN THE MORALLY DIFFICULT POSITION OF NOT SUPPORTING THE PALESTINIANS.

4. RIFAI SAID THAT ASSAD'S POLICIES WHICH HAVE LED SYRIA TO PLAY A MORE RESPONSIBLE ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST ARE IN THE BALANCE. WE THINK THIS IS OVERSTATED BUT AWLIEVE THAT RIFAI IS ACCURATELY REFLECTING SOME OF THE PRESSURE ON PRESIDENT ASSAD AND HIS FRUSTRATION WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION. RIFAI SAID THE PRESIDENT NEEDS HELP, SPECIFICALLY FROM THE UNITED STATES. WORDS ARE NO LONGER SUFFICDHSDJ RDOODAY, ACCORDINGPO RIFAI, IS THE FACT OF ISRAELI TROOPS LEAVING SOUTH LEBANON. ASSAD IS WELL-AWARE OF THE TACTICAL, LET ALONE POLITICAL, DIFFICULTIES OF MOVING UN FORCES IN AND GETTING ISRAEL OUT BUT HE NEEDS, AT A MINIMUM, THE BEGINNING OF THE PROCESS OF ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL RIGHT NOW.

5. RIFAI STRESSED TPET PRESIDENT ASSAD CANNOT FOCUS SOLELY

ON THE NARROW QUESTION OF SOUTH LEBANON. HE IS THE RULER OF A COMPLEX SOCIETY FACING DIFFICULTIES IN ALL SECTORS AND MUST FACTOR THESE CONCERNS INTO HIS DECISIONS ON LEBANON. FOR EXAMPLE, ASSAD'S CONTROL OVER HIS INTERNAL CRITICS HAS BEEN BASED ON HIS ABILITY IN THE PAST TO DEMONSTRATE THE SUCCESS OF HIS LEBANON POLICY. IN THE ABSENCE OF SUCCESSES HE MUST EITHER RELY ON THE SECURITY AND MILITARY APPARATUS TO INTIMIDATE HIS CRITICS OR AMEND HIS POLICIES. IN THWD KEY CRITICAL POLICY AREAS ASSAD IS CURRENTLY FINDING IT DIFFICULT TO DEMONSTRATE SUCCESSES WHICH WOULD VALIDATE HIS APPROACH:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1667

6. A) ASSAD'S EFFORTS TO LIBERALIZE HIS REGIME HAVE BEEN REPEATEDLY CHALLENGED BY THE ASSASSINATIONS OF ALAWITES. AS RIFAI SAID, SOMEBODY WANTS TO EXPORT CONFESSIONAL ANARCHY FROM LEBANON TO SYRIA AND THEIR EFFORTS ARE BEGINNING TO PAY OFF. PROMINENT ALAWITES ARE AFRAID TO MOVE WITHOUT BODYGUARDS AND ARE VEHEMENT IN THEIR OPPOSITION TO CURTAILING SECURITY SERVICE EXCESSES.

7. B) ASSAD'S ECONOMIC OPENING TO THE WEST IS UNDER ATTACK
BY BAATH PARTY NATIONAL COMMAND MEMBER JAMIL SHAYYA AND OTHERS
IN THE GOVERNMENT AND ECONMIN IMADI, THE DEFENDER OF A
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MIXED ECONOMY, APPEARS INCREASINGLY ON THE DEFENSIVE (DAMASCUS
1617). SHAYYA, A LONG-TIME LEFTIST, IS A SURVIVOR AND
PROBABLY WOULD NOT OPENLY CRITICIZE ASSAD'S ECONOMIC POLICY
UNLESS HE SMELLED BLOOD.

7. (C) IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS ASSAD HAS OPENED SYRIA UP TO
THE WEST BUT IS NO CLOSER TODAY TO HIS GOALS OF RESOLVING
THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM AND REGAINING HIS LOST TERRITORY.
BAATH PARTY COMMAND MEMBERS, WHILE NOT ADVERSE TO PLAYING
OFF SUPER POWERS TO SYRIA'S ADVANTAGE, DO CONSIDER THE WEST
TO BE IDEOLOGICALLY INIMICAL TO SYRIA AND DO NOT AGREE
WITH THE SCOPE OF ASSAD'S POLITICAL OPENING TO THE WEST.

8. COMMENT: RIFAI IS PROBABLY ACCURATE IN HIS ASSESSMENT
OF ASSAD'S GENERAL POLITICAL PROBLEMS AND IN OUTLINING SOME
OF THE LIMITS ON ASSAD'S ACTIONS IN LEBANON BUT HE IS OVER-
STATING THE CASE. WE BELIEVE ASSAD'S POLICY OF KEEPING
SYRIA AS UNINVOLVED AS POSSIBLE IN THE LATEST ISRAELI-
PALESTINIAN FIGHTING ENJOYS SOLID SUPPORT AMONG HIS ARMY
OFFICERS, IN ALAWITE CIRCLES, AND FROM A SIGNIFICANT MAJORITY
OF THE SYRIAN POPULACE. HE CAN CONTAIN HIS CRITICS AMONG
THE PALESTINIANS AND THE BAATH BUT HE MAY HAVE TO PAY A
PRICE TEMPORARILY IN TERMS OF HIS BROADER ECONOMIC, POLITICAL,
AND SOCIAL GOALS. HIS POSITION IS THEREFORE UNCOMFORTABLE
AND HE WOULD OBVIOUSLY LIKE TO GET OUT FROM UNDER THE ACCUSA-
TION OF DOING MUCH LESS THAN HE MIGHT FOR THE PALESTINIANS
AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. PROMPT AND CONTINUOUS MOVEMENT IN THE
PROCESS OF ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL WILL BE HELPFUL TO HIM.
MURPHY

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: FOREIGN RELATIONS, ARABS, POLITICAL SETTLEMENT, PALESTINIANS, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS, INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING FORCES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 24 mar 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC01667
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X1
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780130-0850
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780329/aaaaaxzv.tel
Line Count: 209
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 31f737be-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 22 jun 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3214057
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ASSAD UNDER FIRE
TAGS: PEPR, PDEV, MOPS, LE, SY, PLO, UNIFIL, (AL-ASSAD, HAFIZ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbcc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/31f737be-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014